



One Earth Sangha

Lessons from Fire

Parallels in Ecology and Enlightenment

This is a transcript of a talk given by Kristin Barker in January 2020 to participants in One Earth Sangha's EcoSattva Training. [Watch the video here.](#)

Lou and I were already thinking about fire as a potential theme, and the [Lion's Roar](#) piece came out, and our monastic communities are being directly affected by this. So our tradition is in relationship with fire and the destructiveness of fire already. As one of the more dramatic examples of these extreme events associated with climate change—flood, fire, hurricanes—interacting with the chronic versions, the drought, the sea level rise, the species loss, the freshwater scarcity. And here's this particular form, fire, and it's really been part of the EcoSattva training design, if you look at our graphics for it, evocative not just of autumn, but of fire, getting a sense of this transformation and really confronting the destructive aspect and the pain of that.

There's more to fire than just that, but not to skip over that loss potential, because those extreme events—fire, flood, hurricane—we can lose so much. Maybe our communities, our livelihood, a beloved animal, a beloved person, a beloved place. We might know climate refugees and amongst ourselves, there may be climate refugees out there in the EcoSattva community. So as Gaia finds the equilibrium in this transition that Lou was talking about, it can be brutal. Nature sometimes can feel so brutal and we need to stay with that and not skip over that and give that the big compassionate container that the Dharma can offer. It's intense, emotional terrain, facing the loss of what we care about, facing the fear of future loss, facing maybe the anger that we might have at the denial and inaction, for those who have been responsible and accountable for the ways that we've got ourselves into this situation. So in this way and primarily, fire is not a metaphor. It's not a metaphor, it's real, and the costs are real.

As we allow and hold and soothe the pain for ourselves and others, we can also attend to the primordial teaching on offer, the Dharma of fire, if you will. Impermanence is obviously on offer there, as part of the teaching, specifically loss, that phenomena are unreliable. And it goes right back to the beginning of our tradition, because it was the reality of sickness, aging and death that drove Siddhartha from the palace and sent him off onto his quest to find that which was not subject to sickness and aging and death, to the deathless. Those were the first three of the five remembrances, that sickness and aging and death are inherent to this body, inherent to the earth body in some ways. And the fourth, that I will someday lose all that I love.

The reality and nature of fire are to be recognized, to be known, to be contemplated, not to depress us but to come to terms and cultivate our understanding of that which is subject to fire and that which is not subject to fire, this turning towards the deathless. In the context of the relative, there is the absolute. And there is Dharma in forest fire. There's so much in what Lou just talked about. What happens when we suppress fire in the forest? The forest accumulates, and it literally cannot breathe. What happens when we suppress the fire within, that is to say, what happens when we cling, individually and collectively, what happens when we strenuously, desperately avoid sickness, aging, and death, when we are captured and owned by that avoidance? What accumulates on the forest floor so that the light grows dim and the ground cannot breathe and the infestations rage on, that is the clinging.

As Lou was talking about, some species rely on fire to regenerate, so that suppressing the fire means that that next generation never comes about, that which is wholesome, that wants to be born cannot be born, and that dies out. Then, when the fire finally comes, inevitably, it is uncontrolled and uncontrollable. How much hotter it will burn because we haven't been managing fire. So hot that those fire-dependent seeds themselves burn. What is true in ecology is true in this heart-mind: the fire suppression makes fire worse. The possibility is for managed burn.

In response to the raging fire, we fight fire with fire, right? You've heard that phrase. That means I intentionally burn. I give up what the out of control fire will consume so that there's nothing here for it to feed on. I've already released it. And outside the context of an out of control, raging wildfire, there is the management of landscape. What Lou talked about, the prescribed burn. What does it mean to prescribe a burn within this heart-mind? Burning the fuel that the wildfire will take, maybe that means mindfully facing our fears, transforming our fears, mindfully facing that to which we cling, mindfully facing and transforming greed, hatred, and delusion.

Maybe there's a renunciation involved, burning the infestations, burning my attachments to that which is impermanent. I don't have to wait for the wildfire to burn so hot that my mindfulness cannot survive. I'm clinging so hard, there's no mindfulness. That's the wildfire out of control, taking what it will take. I don't have to wait for the fire out of control to incinerate that to which I cling. Like a mindful forest manager, like the Indigenous wisdom teacher, I can perform a prescribed burn. So, maybe part of that is the renunciation; it's not giving up what I value but rather releasing in favor of something I value more deeply and that which is less and less subject to the burn.



And ironically—this is true so often in the tradition—what I think will make me miserable, when I turn towards it, it actually wakes me up. I'm aligned with reality and can be present and open. By that burning, by that renunciation, I am deepened, opened, enlivened, this moment so much more precious, and I am awake and attuned and aligned with reality.

I'll end with this one last thought: in the moment of his awakening, the realization of the absolute and the path of liberation, the Buddha touched the earth. He didn't escape or turn away from this relative world that is subject to burning, and that loss that can sometimes be brutal. He affirmed the earth and she testified on his behalf. This integration of the relative and the absolute, this connected heart-mind, affirming his wisdom, affirming his integration of that. So attuning to fire and loss in fire is what's on offer here, not just as something personal to me, but as fundamental to our experience. This is always burning around us. If we're aligned with that reality and can be present and open in this way, we can orient ourselves to the ongoing transformation of our minds. And from that place respond to the cries of the world.